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AUTHOR Walshok, Mary Lindenstein; Walshok, Marco Gary
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ABSTRACT

Data from in-depth interviews with more than one hundred women over a three-year period suggest that the experience of women in skilled and semiskilled jobs contradicts the conventional wisdom about the values and motives of these women and challenge many sociological findings regarding the alienating character of much blue collar work. The women reported high levels of job satisfaction, defined their work as interesting and challenging, and noted increasing levels of self-assessed competence and self-confidence as a result of their work experience. Also noteworthy in the findings is the absence of references to such things as convenience, ability to combine employment with marriage and child rearing, sociability at the workplace, limited expectations of the worker and similar factors typically regarded as "important to women's occupational choices." Implications of the data are that paid employment may constitute the work sphere in which increasing numbers of women will seek opportunities for challenging work and a sense of personal power; employment in any type of skilled or semiskilled job may be viewed as better than no employment or employment in the traditional areas of women's work which are increasingly diminished and trivialized in urban-industrial societies. (KC)

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# THE PERSONAL AND SOCIAL BENEFITS OF PAID EMPLOYMENT FOR URBAN WOMEN IN SKILLED AND SEMI-SKILLED OCCUPATIONS*

by

Mary Lindenstein Walshok
Project on Working Women
University of California,
San Diego

Marco Gary Walshok
School of Public Administration
and Urban Studies
San Diego State University

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to raise some overlooked issues in the sociological discussion of women in the paid labor force by focusing on the experience of women in skilled and semi-skilled occupations. This group of women represents a vastly under-researched and often misrepresented category of workers in the sociology of work, and even more importantly, an overlooked category of women in contemporary discussions of women's roles and the changing status of women in urban-industrial societies (Oppenheimer, 1970, 1973; Ferree, 1976; Baker, 1978; Roby, 1978). While the general neglect of women's work in the study of work and occupations constitutes a very serious social and sociological problem, if the efforts to overcome this neglect fail to capture the diversity of women's employment experiences, they are likely to result in many of the pitfalls of stereotyping and misinterpretation that characterize the limited views they wish to counteract. Thus, this paper represents an effort to avoid these pitfalls by introducing some data on the qualitative experiences of women working in skilled and semi-skilled occupations in the United States.

A growing number of commentators and researchers are beginning to note the variety of occupations that women pursue in urban-industrial settings, as well as the paucity of research of this variety (Waldman and McEaddy, 1974, Blau, 1978). As more and more descriptive data on the scope of women's work in the paid labor force is generated, it is increasingly clear that beyond traditionally studied female occupations such as nursing and social work, and the recently much discussed entry of women into such professional fields as higher education, law and medicine (Lopata, 1968; Epstein, 1970; Theodore, 1971; Rossi and Calderwood, 1973; Grimm, 1978, Patterson and Engleberg, 1978), that the occupational positions in which the vast majority of women work for paid employment stand outside these areas and remain under-researched. The facts are, however, that most women's work in the paid labor force is as waitresses and cosmetologists, secretaries and bank tellers, small parts assemblers and manufacturing operative, rather than as nurses, teachers, and social workers (Blau, 1978:43). It is also becoming clear that important spheres of changing work roles for women are such areas as skilled and semi-skilled blue collor occupations (Hedges and Beems, 1974). However, these are neglected in research on change, while fields such as medicine and law are emphasized. This at least is true in the United States. Nonetheless, census data shows that it is in jobs like carpentry and small appliance repair, auto mechanics and plumbing that the greatest rates of change seem to be occurring (U.S. Department of Labor, 1975:92). Fortunately, there is growing awareness of this general diversity and previously overlooked pockets of change and a budding attention to the implications of these circumstances. However, at this juncture, the increasing awareness and concern with the diversity and change in female participation in the paid labor force has yet to result in research and theory which takes into account the experiences of these women. As a result, in the United States at least, we have yet to develop a framework of analysis which can begin to help us understand on a comprehensive basis the ways in which women develop and manage the wide range of interests and commitment they bring to paid employment and the variety of occupational positions in which they participate to satisfy these interests and commitments.



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The Project on Working Women at the University of California, San Diego is one of a small but growing number of efforts aimed at focusing sociological research on a broader cross-section of working women, and on a number of issues pertinent to the development of vocational interests, job experiences, and the salience of paid employment in the lives of women workers. It is a three year study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, involving 120 women working in skilled and semi-skilled occupations in the State of California. Utilizing open-ended interviewing techniques, rich and extensive personal data on the ways in which their women developed specific interests and commitments to paid employment, the meaning of paid employment roles with family and community roles are emerging from the data appear to challenge many common assumptions about women and work, about skilled and semi-skilled workers, and in particular, about the experience of what are commonly called blue-collar jobs.

## ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE ON JOB SATISFACTION AMONG SKILLED AND SEMI-SKILLED WOMEN WORKERS

Probably the most significant of findings to come out of our research so far, and what we will focus on in this report, is the unexpectedly high level of job satisfactions among the skilled and semi-skilled workers we have interviewed. Given this general finding, what we are in the process of examining are some of the important dispositional and situational factors which might explain this generally high level of job satisfaction. It is our guess that the ways in which women define and experience skilled and semi-skilled employment differ from men in important ways both because women represent a different sociocultural grouping in most industrialized societies and because the history of women's work differs substantially from the history of men's work. Thus, women bring to paid employment a different set of background experiences and contemporary expectations which may in turn give rise to different self-definitions of their job experiences. In general sociological terms, it is important to assess the extent to which the subjective history and characteristics that people bring to their work--such as those derivative of such distinguishing background variables as sex, race, or ethnicity--may give rise to different feelings, attitudes, and evaluations about the work process and work setting. Accordingly, as more and more women move into paid employment generally, and specifically into occupational fields previously dominated by men, it is important to assess the extent to which gender operates as a specifying or charifying variable in our understanding of the quality of working life in general, and the levels of worker satisfaction in particular occupational sectors of the economy.

From both a policy and a sociological point of view, it is important to understand what differentiates the experience of work between women and men and between women in different occupational sectors. Is the work experience of a cosmetologist qualitatively different that that of a nurse or secretary in terms of the benefits

and salience given to paid employment? Does a woman on an assembly line or in a skilled trade experience her work in the same way as a man in that position? Or, does a woman bring a different personal history, different expectations and a different sense of contemporary constraints and options which result in her experiencing the job differently than a man? Is it possible, as Stouffer,et.al,(1949) suggested, that an individual's assessment, overall evaluation and level of satisfaction with where he/she is and where he/she is going, is as much a matter of social comparison as it is a question of purely individual needs and motivations? If social comparison does operate in this assessment, how do the bases for social comparison women bring to the job and the workplace affect the evaluations they make compared to one another, but especially, compared to men?

Our data suggests that the experience of women in skilled and semi-skilled jobs contradicts conventional wisdom about the values and motives of this sector of employed women and challenges many sociological findings and interpretations regarding the alienating character of much blue collar work. The women we have studied have high levels of job satisfaction, define their work as interesting and challenging and report increasing levels of self assessed competence and self-confidence as a result of their experience in the paid labor force. In addition, they report these feelings positively affect other roles they play. These findings are particularly true for the large number of "pioneer" women included in this study; women moving into nontraditional blue collar jobs such as carpentry, auto mechanics and small appliance repair. However, even among the women in the more traditional positions such as cosmetology, operative jobs and small parts assembly that we interviewed, the vast majority reported paid employment a very positive experience for the most part as preferable to domestic roles. In all cases, the women took pains to describe in their own words what it was about their current employment that they valued and how it contrasted with previous work experiences and the options open to most women. For the cosmetologists this most often meant domestic roles. For the welder or carpenter it often meant secretarial work. In all instances, however, the high levels of satisfaction seemed to be tied to a comparison with one's previously less desirable situation or with the respondent's sense of where most other women are in the dominant occupational structure. In this sense, social comparison emerged as an important clarifying factor for understanding our findings.

The data under discussion represents a very small piece of the more than four hours of in-depth interviews conducted with the women over a three year period. They derive from open ended questions about what got each woman interested in her current job, what she saw as the benefits of paid employment generally, and what she felt were the good and bad things about her current job situation. When we originally began this research, we expected to find significant differences between the women in traditional women's jobs such as cosmetology and those in nontraditional blue collar jobs such as auto mechanics. As it turned out, there were more similarities than differences particularly with reference to the process by which vocational interests develop, the steps involved in getting into a particular job, and the general values identified with paid employment. Even the qualities that the different women liked about their work were not that dissimilar. Cosmetologists frequently described in positive terms the autonomy and control they felt in doing hair; the sense of having accomplished something at the

end of the day because of their ability to transform the women who came into the shop. The women in small appliance repair similarly described their satisfaction with the independence and control they have in their work; the sense of having produced something, and accomplished something at the end of the day. This preoccupation with a sense of accomplishment was present in many of the interviews, and was the most frequently mentioned gratification of paid employment for the women studied. While all the women mentioned money as an essential factor in their employment, for most the need for money was an assumed, "taken-for-granted" factor (Walshok, 1978). For them the self-conscious, critical questions, surrounding their work had to do with how much money and how much satisfaction could be gotten from particular jobs.

It is our impression that among middle class women a more critical question has been whether or not to work in the paid labor force in the first place. Most of our respondents probably because they were either working class, or single heads of households, have always assumed they would be involved in some form of paid employment. Additionally, the social and economic circumstances of many of our respondents led them to describe domesticity as boring and in some cases psychologically hazardous because they felt so useless. The women we interviewed had few of the outside interests, social networks and volunteer opportunities that frequently represent attractive alternatives to paid employment among more affluent women, and so when we tried to assess if they saw paid employment as problematic or in conflict with marriage and family roles we drew a virtual blank. Paid employment for the most part for most of these women we interviewed is described as an inevitable feature of adult life.

Beyond this general finding of job satisfaction across both traditional and nontraditional jobs, what is most noteworthy about our findings on the benefits and satisfactions women in skilled and semi-skilled occupations find, is the virtual absence of references to such things as convenience. ability to combine employment with marriage and child rearing, sociability at the workplace, limited expectations of the worker, and a host of similar factors typically identified as important in the employment choices of skilled and semi-skilled women workers. Women in traditional jobs were somewhat more likely to raise these issues, but in the overall sample such factors as feelings of accomplishment, challenging work, and a chance to grow and learn as well as earn a good living were the most often cited positive employment factors as the data reported in the following section dramatically demonstrates.

## SATISFACTIONS OF PAID EMPLOYMENT FOR SKILLED AND SEMI-SKILLED WOMEN WORKERS

We mentioned in the previous section the taken-for-granted importance of money for all the women we interviewed. What is critical to an overall understanding of these women's orientation to paid employment, however, is that in their comments about what they saw as the positive things about their current employment situation in the paid labor force, such commonly assumed factors as money, sociability, convenient hours, location, and qualities of the job which assured its non-interference which marriage and family roles were rarely raised by the women.

Rather, factors such as challenge, personal satisfaction, self-worth and self-confidence were the issues raised by the women in the first year interviews. The comments of both traditional and nontraditional women workers were not substantially different in this regard as Table 1 reveals.

TABLE 1

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF CURRENT EMPLOYMENT (Year 1)

| | Traditional (31) | | Nontraditional (87) | | Total Sample (118) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Earnings | 9 | 29 | 34 | 39 | 43 | 36 |
| Relationships with Coworkers | 8 | 26 | 39 | 45 | 47 | 40 |
| Adequacy of Preparation for Fields | 16 | 52 | 37 | 43 | 53 | 45 |
| Sense of General Competence | 10 | 32 | 28 | 32 | 38 | 32 |
| Self Concept | 16 | 52 | 59 | 68 | 75 | 64 |
| Status as a Woman | 18 | 58 | 58 | 67 | 66 | 56 |
| Nature of the Work | 10 | 32 | 29 | 33 | 14 | 12 |

It is important to note the high percentage of both traditional and nontraditional women who were extremely task oriented, by which we mean concerned with the adequacy of training and employment skills they were developing. In addition, large numbers of women commented on how their jobs effected their self concepts emphasizing feelings of accomplishment, improved self-confidence and feelings of being generally more able to function in the world independently. These themes also characterized the comments related to how the women felt their status as a woman effected their employment experiences. The more detailed breakdowns of these categories are represented below in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

TABLE 2

POSITIVE THINGS ABOUT THE PREPARATION
TRAINING BEING PROVIDED BY CURRENT EMPLOYMENT (Year 1)

| | Total N Commenting (53) | % of Total N Commenting (100) |
|---|---|---|
| Good General Background | 19 | 36% |
| Experience with Tools | 10 | 19% |
| "On hands" job Experience | 17 | 32% |
| Instructors | 16 | 30% |
| Opportunity to learn | 28 | 53% |
| Chance for Advancement | 5 | 10% |

TABLE 4

POSITIVE IMPACT OF R'S STATUS AS A WOMAN ON CURRENT EMPLOYMENT (Year I)

| | Total N Commenting (66) | % of Total Commenting (100) |
|---|---|---|
| Women Work/Try Harder | 22 | 33 |
| Women Have a "Special Touch" | 18 | 27 |
| Size, Attention to Details Makes Work Easier for Women | 18 | 27 |
| Women Receive Special Treatment | 13 | 20 |

Similarly when the women were asked to comment on the negative things about their current employment, comments about pay or inconvenience to marriage and family roles were much less significant in comparison to the women's more general concerns about characteristics of the work itself as the Table 5 summarizes.

TABLE 5

NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF CURRENT EMPLOYMENT (Year 1)

| | Traditional (31) | | Nontraditional (87) | | Total Sample (118) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Earnings | 2 | 7 | 18 | 21 | 20 | 17 |
| Relationships with Coworkers | 7 | 23 | 44 | 51 | 51 | 43 |
| Adequacy of Preparation for Field | 9 | 29 | 52 | 60 | 61 | 52 |
| Sense of General Competence | 1 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 |
| Self Concept | 3 | 10 | 18 | 21 | 21 | 18 |
| Status as a Woman | 11 | 35 | 60 | 69 | 71 | 60 |
| Nature of the Work | 9 | 29 | 35 | 40 | 44 | 37 |

When elaborating on the negative aspects of their current employment, the women who commented on the above noted general problems often went on to mention such things as negative attitudes among coworkers (67% of 57) of poor supervisors (31% of 61) and poor facilities (36% of 61). For the nontraditional women discouragement from supervisors (34% of 61), lack of background equal to men (33% of 61) and general differences in treatment because they are women (69% of 61) were problems

which resulted in their having to work harder and get more on their own. Finally, a number of the nontraditional women in the first year negatively defined their jobs as physically hard (52%) and hazardous (36%).

What is critical about all this data is the extent to which the women tend to focus on the task and self concept related aspects of their employment rather than money, convenience, sociability, role conflict or feelings of general alienation and frustration with attendant longings to be at home or in some more leisurely settings than paid employment. In this light, it is also significant to note than when the women were asked in the first year interviews if they would cease paid employment if they didn't need the money only a few said they would. This finding further supports the notion that these women derive diverse and complicated rewards from their paid employment.

When we reinterviewed 61 of the women the second year we found that the significance of task competency and self concept remained as important as they had been when these women were first starting out in their jobs. Tables 6 and 7 summarize these findings.

Table 6

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF CURRENT EMPLOYMENT (Year II)

| Work Itself (49) | | | Work Setting (27) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | | N | % |
| Earnings | 21 | 43 | Location | 6 | 22 |
| Types of Skills | 39 | 80 | Coworkers | 16 | 59 |
| Pacing/Independence, etc. | 27 | 55 | Supervosors | 7 | 26 |
| Chance to Learn | 13 | 27 | Size | 1 | 4 |
| Challenge/ Accomplishment | 20 | 41 | Customers | 8 | 30 |
| Hours | 7 | 14 | | | |

Table 7

NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF CURRENT EMPLOYMENT (Year II)

| Work Itself (45) | | | Work Setting (40) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | | N | % |
| Earnings | 8 | 18 | Location | 10 | 25 |
| Types of Skills | 23 | 51 | Coworkers | 18 | 45 |
| Pacing/Independence, etc. | 21 | 47 | Supervisors | 19 | 48 |
| Chance to Learn | 9 | 20 | Size | 0 | 0 |
| Challenge/ Accomplishment | 1 | 2 | Customers | 10 | 25 |
| Hours | 12 | 27 | | | |
| Hazardous | 21 | 47 | | | |

Similarly, the connection between paid employment, general feelings of competence, and personal well-being held true in the second year interviews as Table 8 shows.

Table 8

SIGNIFICANCE OF PAID EMPLOYMENT
- IN RESPONDENT'S LIVES (Year 11)

| | Traditional (10) | | Nontraditional (51) | | Total (61) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Financial | 1 | 10 | 15 | 29 | 16 | 26 |
| Social Relationships | 4 | 40 | 3 | 6 | 7 | 11 |
| Personal Satisfactions | 5 | 50 | 22 | 43 | 27 | 44 |
| Effects on Family or other Relationships | 0 | 0 | 4 | 8 | 4 | 7 |

The numbers and percentage reported in the foregoing Table 5 are all derived from a content analysis of the comments offered by our respondents to open-ended interview questions. As we move into a discussion of the implications of these findings for a broader understanding of the gratifications these women receive in their skilled and semi-skilled jobs, it is useful to draw directly on statements made by the women themselves. This is important because these statements reveal how the feelings of competence and self-confidence experienced in the workplace by these women are intensified by their spillover into their personal lives. This in turn, can only be understood in light of our earlier comments about the processes of social comparison these women appear to go through in evaluating their occupational circumstances.

## SPILLOVER EFFECTS OF PAID EMPLOYMENT FOR SKILLED AND SEMI-SKILLED WOMEN WORKERS

Everything about this research on skilled women workers suggests that what women seek in their work parallels in general terms what men seek in their work. What appears to differentiate the work experience and the meanings attached to paid employment between them are distinctive histories of economic opportunities and sociocultural expectations tied to gender (Blau, 1978:30-40: Acker, 1978:142-147). Thus, similar needs for feelings of competence, of making a contribution, of being necessary, of being productive, and in control of one's time and energy have been managed within differing sex segregated sectors of the society and the economy. Although women's social and economic roles have always been characterized by lower levels of control, satisfaction, and power than men's roles, it can be argued that with urbanization and industrialization (and even more so with developments characteristic of post-industrial societies) the decline in the relative power, automony and satisfaction derived from traditional economic and social roles tied

to the family and domestic work leads to a search for alternatives; a search which most frequently ends in the paid workplace. Not discounting the significance of the economy's need for women workers, nor the need women and families have for the wages of women workers, one can still argue that paid employment represents for large numbers of women the locus of personal feelings of competence, challenge and confidence that at earlier points in history were found in domestic and family roles and in relationships tied to family and neighborhood networks. With the decline in the economic and social centrality of the homemaking role and the routinization and trivialization of many central homemaking tasks, it is not surprising that women seek meaningful work elsewhere. Not only general feelings about paid employment, but seemingly similar work experiences may also be evaluated and understood differently by women than by men because of the distinct socio-economic background women bring to particular jobs in the paid labor force. Thus, the same jobs which over generations of male workers have come to seem routine, tiresome, and alienating, may for new generations of female workers be defined as challenging, rewarding and interesting. In comparison with the social and economic position of women historically a paid job, particularly a paid skilled job with its challenge of unfamiliar and untried skills, processes and relationships, may provide gratifications extending far beyond the work role alone. The comments of our respondents are illustrative of this and related points.

We begin with some comments which reflect these women's sense of general competence since joining the paid labor force compared to how they felt about themselves prior to employment. A mature, married woman working outdoor in landscape construction expressed her feelings in the following manner:

> ... doing landscape work makes me feel good about myself; being able to learn it, and even to some degree, excell in certain areas of it. It made me feel really good and confirmed some things that maybe I only vaguely thought--I always thought that maybe women could do all these things, and I always thought I could, but you have to prove things to yourself sometimes. ... I also feel stronger--or, maybe I feel I can use the strength I already had, not just physically, but my inner strength. Being able to say I can do it has made a difference in how I react at home, and how I react to people I deal with. I'm not as self-conscious about myself and things I can do.

A cosmetologist in her middle twenties stated her feeling about the personal benefits deriving from her new job this way:

> Working has given me more of a good feeling, I would say. I'm a lot more competent, a lot more ... willing to do things--not nervous about--doing things that are unfamiliar to me as before, when I was a housewife. Anything that was unfamiliar to me, I was very nervous and apprehensive about doing it ... I'm not as much now as I was then.

A young woman working as a cable splicer for the telephone company expressed feelings quite similar to those of the cosmotologist:

> ... I always lacked self-confidence in myself, and--this is helping a lot, because it is something that I want real bad ... I'm pushing myself a lot on it, and I'm showing myself I can do things that I didn't think I could do ... I'm starting to think ... fantasies that I've had all my life are attainable ...

A young pipefitter made much the same point:

> Yeah, I would say that for me it's real important to have something, some productive work that I feel that I do everyday and, like, sometimes, you know, you're just feeling depressed for whatever reason--some friends move out of town or someone you know was very ill or you're having hassles with your friends. It's just nice to be able to go and do something like, install a toilet which works. I feel L like to have something concrete that I can do and feel something's going right.

Comments such as these occurred spontaneously in over seventy of the one hundred and seventeen interviews. In general, they reflect how these women see their success in securing paid employment in a skilled job as having important consequences for their overall sense of confidence and efficacy in the world. In elaborating this theme a number of women made direct comparisons to previous jobs and roles such as homemaking when describing how their current status as a paid employeerleated to their self concept. Some who compared employment with homemaking expressed sentiments not unlike that of this mature black woman working as a machinist:

> ... it's given me a better feeling about myself. It's enabled me to feel that I can do something besides clean house and cook and so, what would you call that, an emotional advantage?

The woman in landscaping quoted earlier had this to say about paid employment compared to being at home:

> ... I said before I was lazy and I am, in a sense. If I sit home and I have nothing but the housework, it just seems like my day gets longer and longer and I do less and less and less and I escape more. I watch television, or I read. I also drink more. ... I drink more because I'm bored. And I get insomnia and all kinds of jazz like that, which I don't do when I'm working at something I enjoy working at because I'm satisfied. ... I feel good about myself and you can't be bored, then.

Many of the women also compared their current job situation with previous jobs they had held. The following comments by a plumber's apprentice are an example:

> ... It's given me more confidence in myself. When I worked at Payless, I had to deal with people on a very steady, heavy basis where I was part of the machine, the cash register--I didn't count. Now I deal with people on an individual basis and it's much easier for me and I have a feeling of self worth. I'm proud to say I'm a plumber. ... It's done wonders for me and my self-confidence and it will do wonders for my financial status someday. I have all that to look forward to, I guess.

This sense of increased self worth is echoed in the comments of a young welder who never finished high school:

> ... I feel so much better about myself since I started doing this. I just started doing this. I just hated myself when I was a secretary, you know.

> It was no challenge to me and it just felt sort of, like, nothing, you know. Now, I feel like, I feel more self-confidence and also really enjoy what I do a lot more.

Even a highly educated woman such as this woodworker with a B.A. and graduate study felt very good about becoming a cabinet maker in light of the low skilled jobs available to even college educated women:

> ... I've had a lot of real terrible jobs, you know, and I never really think I'm bad for having those, I think they're bad. Since I've done the woodworking, and actually produced objects, dumb things, that's become very important to me now. I mean, I never had that feeling because I never produced anything before.

Finally, many of the women entering the nontraditional jobs described significantly increased levels of self-confidence and feelings of competence because they were doing untypical jobs and jobs requiring skills and knowledge they once felt they couldn't master. This sense of newfound competency and confidence at doing an untypical job was expressed well by a young woman doing custom woodwork:

> When I started I couldn't even put up a shelf on a wall. I had never done anything with my hands. My out-in-the-world experience had always been academic and things I could do with my head. I thought I couldn't learn about machines but since I started it, I realized that I had just as much common sense as anyone else and that that's where most learning comes from. I feel that I could do anything occupation-wise now.

A gas meter repairperson stated it this way:

> ... Um, I think its very important the fact that I'm learning to do things that at one point seemed completely above me, certain kinds of knowledge, like working on cars or something. At some point in my life, it seemed like I'd never be able to learn things like that, and now, I'm gradually doing it.

And a small appliance repairperson stated it this way:

> ... any mechanical work--I grew up thinking that everything was terribly complicated and mysterious and it was a revelation, I think, to find out that it isn't.

All of these comments in association with the data reported in the tables presented in the earlier part of this paper suggest a more complicated picture of the meaning of paid employment in the lives of women working in skilled and semi-skilled occupations than popular images, at least in the United States, would suggest. The women we interviewed are looking for challenge, autonomy, satisfaction, and respect in their work. In short, the particular benefits of their newly arrived at occupational position merges with a more general desire for feelings of personal efficacy and self worth that are intimately

connected to the world of work. A plumber's apprentice who never finshied high school makes this point most eloquently:

> ... I think for me, having a job for me means having some kind of real contact with the world. Like when I was laid off last winter, I mean sometimes I would just totally go into hibernation or something, you know, and I feel totally out of contact with people and cut off ... so when I'm out working and making a salary, you know, even though I don't like the job or whatever, you know, at least I'm out there performing, you know. ... So it's really important to me to ah--be ah--just to have some kind of connection like that through work.

Many of our respondents echoed this sentiment in various ways. A young cosmetologist stated her feelings on this point this way:

> ... if you don't like your work, then ah--you don't like the world around you and you just don't like yourself. You know, you have to like yourself. You have to be able to like what you're doing in order to succeed. I have a strong feeling in that area.

A welder we interviewed who had never finished high school talked about making choices about pursuing new job possibilities and just getting a job gave her personal satisfaction:

> I feel really good about myself. Just making a choice and going out and doing something about it and then managing after a lot of looking around to get a job and dealing with all these different, really new things. They've made me feel pretty happy with myself. It's mostly just involved making choices in life.

Given the statements above and the tabular data they are related to what can we reasonably conclude about the unexpectedly high levels of job satisfaction reported by the women we interviewed? At a minimum, they strongly suggest that paid employment increasingly may constitute the work sphere in which increasing numbers of women in American society (and perhaps in other urban-industrial societies where similar sex segregation of the occupational structure has occurred) will seek opportunities for challenging, non-alienating work, for a sense of personal power and efficacy. In addition, they suggest that employment which on the surface does not appear to have such qualities from the social scientists point of view, may have them from the comparative perspective women bring to their evaluation of experiences and opportunities. Thus the achievement of paid employment itself, and the work-centered and extra-occupational opportunities such employment opens up in comparison to other roles open to women must be seen as a critical factor contributing to the overall level of job satisfaction these women workers report. Furthermore, our findings suggest that women working for pay in skilled and semi-skilled jobs, especially those from lower income and working class backgrounds, may settle for and be satisfied with less highly regarded and typically less prestigious paid employment positions than men because of the differing basis of social comparison on which they judge their opportunities, and the concrete work experiences they have had in the past--be it housework or routinized traditional female employment in the paid labor force. As difficult and disturbing as it may be to acknowledge at this point in human history, for increasing numbers of women employment in any type of skilled

and semi-skilled job, regardless of its prestige, is better than either no paid employment at all, or paid employment in the traditional sex segregated area of the paid labor force. And, this is so not only because of the better economic return that such jobs tend to generate, but also because of the comparative advantages such work has in contrast to traditional women's work--domestic or in the paid labor force--both of which are increasingly diminished and trivialized in urban-industrial societies.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

From the array of findings and commentary above, what insights and relationships might reasonably be generalized to the study of work and changing women's roles in societies and cultures other than the United States? Given the nature of our data, it should be obvious that we can offer only the most tentative of considerations. However, certain points that have come up in our discussion would seem to have cross-cultural utility in the study of work, and may provide a basis for inquiry in other urban-industrial societies and those developing societies where transformations paralleling the changes in occupational opportunity that generally accompany industrial development are occurring. First, in any society where significantly large and distinct cohorts of workers exist (distinguished by virtue of some ascribed characteristic such as religion, race, ethnicity, or sex) which have as well experienced limited occupational opportunities, when new occupational positions open up for these groups because of economic and technical changes in the society, there may be parallels to the positive experiences of American women entering skilled and semi-skilled jobs. That is, there may be something general to the process whereby the evaluation of a situation by different cohorts of worker varies according to the socio-historical background and contemporary occupational context in which the members of the cohort make their evaluations of viable job alternatives and opportunities.

Let us be more precise. Too often contemporary commentators on work have assumed that certain kinds of jobs are inherently alienating for the worker because of their routinization and compartmentalization of the work process. But, it is possible that these commentators have failed to take sufficient account of how the definitions different groups of workers bring to bear on their evaluations of how alienating particular jobs are occur within a framework of social comparisons. For example, as our discussion and data point out, the failure to seriously examine the content and form of the domestic roles women traditionally have performed in American society results in a gap in our understanding of the relative value placed on even very routine paid work roles by women which in comparison to domestic work roles may be seen as exciting and interesting. In a sense, the point we are making here is an all too obvious one. Illegal Mexican aliens employed in agricultural and domestic work in California, Turkish and other Middle Eastern waiters and laborers in Northern Europe, African and West Indian workers in Great Britain are all examples of cohorts of workers who tend to the work that dominant, and in most cases white male, groups of workers avoid. However, too often the interpretations given to these circumstances are crude and simplistic, filled with inaccurate and unrealistic stereotypes of the

causal nexus which motivates these workers to take these jobs and to find the modicum of satisfaction in them they do. The people who do this work do it not only because of the money. They often find it "meaningful" and "satisfying" because in pacing, complexity, challenge and interestit represents more than has traditionaly been available to them. At the very least, this certainly has been the case for women and the work roles they have performed in the American context, and we would venture to say in most of the industrialized nations.

In light of the above, we feel that a first step in addressing these problems is to give much more attention and consideration to the dynamics of social comparison in the study of work generally and in the analysis of women's work in particular. In addition, the approach taken to such comparisons should follow not only a motivational and social psychological orientation as outlined by Goodman (1977), but be as concerned with the historical configuration of structural circumstances that impinge on distinct cohorts of workers (such as women workers entering new occupational areas) and circumscribe the context within which motivated action occurs. It is these structural forces and their particular historical development that locate different cohorts of workers in respect ot the overall occupational structure of a society and the rewards and benefits distributed through that structure. Therefore, their place in any analysis of the social comparison processes that women workers or any other group of workers use in determining their satisfaction with their work situation must be assured.

Finally, what do we see as some of the major implications of this paper for understanding the changing economic and social roles of women in society? While the paucity of current research to take adequate account of the sorts of factors and processes discussed here represents the kind of problem we confront in developing a more sophisticated picture of women's contemporary economic and social circumstance in urban-industrial society, this situation also reflects a more enduring problem with the general sociological study of society. That is, the failure to view women and their economic and social roles in society as vital to the dynamics of social change that are emerging in practically all societies in this century, and are most evident in urban-industrial contexts. Thus, in the United States at least, the unwillingness to analyse traditional women's work in the home as work critical to the overall economic productivity of society, and the lack of serious study of the large sex segregate pockets of female employment and their critical contribution to the overall economic and social structure of society continues to mark most current discussion of social change beyond the literature specifically devoted to women. This occurs despite the increasing evidence that the movement of women into the paid labor force, its patterns and dynamics, constitutes one of the most far-reaching instances of social change to occur in the last half of the twentieth century (Huber, 1976). The failure to seriously study these changes in women's work from the perspective of social change, therefore, leaves us with very little on which to accurately account, let alone explain and predict with any confidence, the forces that accompany and energize these changes and the directions in which they are headed. This situation, in turn, has the grave policy consequence of leaving us unprepared to deal creatively and productively with these changes and their impacts on both the workplace and society at large, and actually increases the potential for confusion and destructive responses in dealing with them.

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